

THE SOCIAL PIRATES

The Newest Kalem Picture Now Being Presented at the Leading Motion Picture Theatres in Greater New York

Plot by George Bronson Howard
Novelization by Hugh C. Weir

Story No. 6

THE MASTER SWINDLERS

Two American girls, Mona Hartley and Mary Burnett, set about punishing the "Wolves of Society" through their check books. This is the story of their sixth adventure.

(Copyright by Kalem Company.)

MONA HARTLEY and Mary Burnett were in a cheap room of a cheap lodging house, and their clothes were shabby. Their personal belongings had been reduced to a minimum.

"Oh!" said Mona, departing. "Mary—if we could only have a real dinner—in a place where the waiters know what you want before you do yourself, and the linen is clean and the silver bright!"

"Don't!" said Mary, sharply. "It only makes it seem worse if we think of things like that."

She looked regretfully at the single dime she held in her hand. "Ten cents apiece for dinner, Mona. Come on—let's dine out! We'll buy buns and eat them in the park or some place like that!"

"All right," said Mary, listlessly. "I saw a store yesterday where the buns looked bigger than at the place we've been going to. Let's try them. It's not much farther."

Important events have hung on decisions as trifling and as wholly dictated by chance as that one of the two girls to try a new bakery. While they were selecting their buns they saw a young man who was giving an order at the desk. He was a flashy-looking youth, with a touch of the Bohemian about him. And Mona, peering at him, was convinced that she had seen him somewhere in the past. He paid no attention to either of the girls, and Mona had a good chance to study him. She noticed that he kept his left hand carefully in his pocket. But an accident, the dropping of some of the coins he had received in change, compelled him to remove it and now Mary's attention was attracted as well as Mona's. Both were struck by the curious tattooed design on the back of the hand—a design familiar to them as "The Devil's Sign," consisting of a small demon dancing on an inverted cross. But it was only Mona who seemed to see any real significance in this. Mary understood her signal, and they both followed him.

"But why?" asked Mary, when they were on his trail.

"I think I know him," said Mona. "And if I am right I believe we're not wasting our time. There's no reason why we shouldn't follow him, is there? There's nothing else that we have to do—that is more promising."

"I suppose not," said Mary. "But that doesn't mean much."

Even when the young man turned in at the impressive entrance of the Columbian Art Museum, Mona insisted on following him. And when she saw him sit down before a certain picture, uncock a small case, and set to work copying the picture, she was greatly excited.

"Come on," said Mona. "I want to see the picture. I think I know it, but I want to make sure."

"It's the 'Monna Vanna!'" said Mary, after they had slipped up behind the painter, without attracting his attention, and glimpsed the nameplate on the picture.

"I thought so!" said Mona, triumphantly. "Come on—I want to show you something in the catalogue."

"There!" she said. "Raphael—Monna Vanna—1532. Considered by many to represent the greatest phase of the master. Loaned to the Colum-

bian Collection by J. de Veers Crogan. Value estimated at \$125,000."

"I don't see what good it does us," said Mary, practically.

"Wait! Now I know who that young chap is who is copying it! Harry the Hun, Mary—the most famous picture thief in the world. He's done impossible things, and he's never been caught—and held. If he's copying that picture it's because he means to steal it."

"Well—that's his business," said Mary. "I still don't see where we come in."

"If we know what he's planning to do, why isn't there a chance for us to cut in somehow?" asked Mona.

"We can surely find some way to profit by what we've found out! And I don't mean giving him away, either."

"Well, I'll admit frankly that I don't see any chance," said Mary. "But there's nothing else in sight. I suppose we might as well wait for him to get through here and see where he goes. No harm in that."

"No harm—and a lot of good, perhaps," said Mona. "I've got a feeling that we've stumbled on some good luck, Mary."

There was a small park opposite the museum, and here they sat and ate their decidedly frugal repast. They had some time to wait, but they were glad to see when Harry did appear, that he paid no attention at all to them. He hurried off, instead, as if he had an appointment to keep, and they had to wait for him to come back. They managed it, however, and saw him go into a curious little store. The shop, if its sign could be believed, was kept by one Melnotte, and its windows indicated that anything might be bought within—or sold. The most extraordinary collection of odds and ends was visible, and, among other things, a few paintings, which, Mona said, were of no great value or importance. But Mona was breathing fast, none the less.

"Melnotte!" she said. "Now I'm sure, Mary! This store is just a blind. Melnotte is one of the most famous 'art fences' in the country. Connoisseurs who care more about what is in their collections than how they obtain their treasures know him. He has

been receiver of all sorts of stolen art treasures for years!"

"I'm beginning to think you're right, and that this is going to be worth while, Mona," said Mary. "The thing for us to do is to establish a connection with Melnotte—and I think I see a way to do it, too!"

"Now that I've got you interested I'm sure we're going to get something done!" said Mona, confidentially. "It's when you can't see a way that I'm afraid, Mary."

"Well, you've got your part to do, too," said Mary. "You used to study art. Can you paint well enough to pretend you're making a copy of the Monna Vanna?"

"Just about," said Mona. "They wouldn't throw me out if I went there to make a copy."

Next morning the paths of the two girls diverged for the time. Mona, with her easel and her painting things, went to the museum. Harry was not there when she arrived, but after she had wandered about for a time, enjoying the opportunity to look at the pictures, she saw him come in and take his place before the Monna Vanna. She waited a little longer, and then went up to him, rather timidly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she said. "I wonder—would you mind very much if I sat here and copied the picture, too?"

He turned to her with a faint start of annoyance. But she was pretty enough to disarm him at once. However, it was in a rather ungracious tone that he replied.

"It is not my picture, my dear young lady," he said. "You or any one else can come here and copy any picture you like."

Despite this rather rude beginning, they were soon chatting amicably. Mary, meanwhile, had also been at work. She had taken out from the trunk the two old pieces of jewelry that Mona had found and cleaned them as well as to make them look too new. And with these she went to the shop of Melnotte. She was lucky enough to find Melnotte disengaged. He sized her up at once, from her timid, indifferent manner, as a woman in distress, and, because she was good looking, attended to her himself.

"I—I want to borrow something on these, if you please," she said, laying her trifles before him. He picked them up, sniffed, and then pushed them back to her.

"For heaven's sake—what do you bring me stuff like this for?" he asked, contemptuously. "This is nothing but junk you've got, my dear! And this isn't a pawn shop! We buy—and, of course, for a good customer we will sometimes arrange a loan."

Mary looked at him pitiously. And then as she picked up the pin and the bracelet she began to weep.

"Oh—oh!" she sobbed. "What am I to do? What am I to do? I have nothing else left—and you say these are worthless! Oh, I don't know what to do—I have got to have money, or I'll be put out of my room!"

Melnotte was a pretty thorough-paced scoundrel, but he had a streak of sentiment in him that made him sorry for Mary. He might have conquered that and have hardened his heart if she hadn't been so unusually attractive. But the whole thing was too much for him. So he came around the counter and took another look at her offering.

"Well, now, I'll tell you, young lady," he said. "I ought not to have said this was junk. It's old stuff, and I suppose the things are priceless!"



"IT'S THE FAMOUS MONNA VANNA," SAID MONA, "VALUED AT \$125,000! IF HARRY THE HUN IS COPYING THAT PICTURE IT'S BECAUSE HE MEANS TO STEAL IT!"

"Oh, yes!" sobbed Mary. "They've been in my family ever so long, and I wouldn't dream of parting with them if I weren't so desperate!"

"Well, well, don't cry," said Melnotte. "I'll tell you—the value of these things is sentimental. No one would buy them from me, so it wouldn't be business for me to give you anything for them. But I don't like to see you in trouble. You keep the things and I'll see what can be done for you. Suppose you let me walk around to your room with you and see if I can't keep your landlady quiet?"

Mary understood his purpose perfectly well. He wanted to see if she had been telling the truth. But she agreed, tearfully, and in a few minutes gave him ample proof of her story. He was impressed by the barren poverty of the room she shared with Mona, and he did not notice that any one else lived in the room. There was little enough, indeed, to indicate that there were two of them there!

"How much do you owe?" he asked. Mary told him the exact amount—because, of course, she expected indirectly to get much more out of him than she could have done by naming a greater sum, which must still have been petty.

"There you are!" he said. "I'll lend you the money, and when your ship comes in you can pay me back."

"Oh—it's hard to take charity!" she sobbed. "Could you—don't there some way I could do for you in your shop? Then I'd feel I was earning the money, at least!"

"Why?" he said, and paused, struck by the idea. "I think there might be," he said. "Come around in the morning and I'll find something for you to do!"

"I told you!" said Mona, exultingly, when she heard what had happened. "See! Everything is working out just the way we wanted it, too! I'm more certain than ever that Harry's going to steal the picture. And if you're going to be in the store you certainly ought to be able to find out what they're going to sell it for!"

"That's what puzzles me," said Mary. "They must have some plan. This picture is too well known for any one to be able to show it as his own after it's been stolen, isn't it?"

"But Harry doesn't want to work, and who would pay a great price for a picture that he would have to keep hidden after he got it?"

"That's perfectly true," said Mona. "But Harry doesn't want his time wasted. You may be sure that if he takes the risk of stealing the Monna Vanna he and Melnotte have got a purchaser picked out for it already!"

"Won't the theft be discovered at once?"

"I don't know. Not if Harry is as clever as he usually is. He stole a Gainsborough from the National Gallery in London and the theft wasn't discovered for six months. Even then they only suspected him—they could not prove that he was the thief."

The next day Mary reported to Melnotte and went to work, and Mona resumed her copying at the museum. For a few days nothing of importance happened.

He keeps me upstairs, most of the time," Mary told Mona. "I'm sorting out a lot of things he has there in a sort of storeroom. There's a copy of your Monna Vanna picture, by the way, that looks quite old, and that is pretty good, I imagine."

"It's been faked to make it look old, probably," said Mona. "Well, I haven't so much to report. Harry's sitting a little nervous because I'm there, I think. You see, if he is going

to steal the picture, having me around must be embarrassing. He can't very well take it while I'm looking on, you see. He offered to help me with my copy to-day."

"Let him—tomorrow," said Mary. "I think it's time. I'm pretty sure I know what they've got up their sleeves now."

So the next day Mona gladly accepted Harry's offer to help her with the finishing touches her copy required. She thanked him, when it was done, and went away. But she lingered and saw him come out, and then she returned and took up the watch from a nook she had discovered in her wanderings in the museum. It seemed, however, that she was doomed to be disappointed, for Harry did not return, as she had supposed he would.

Mary, however, saw him come into Melnotte's and she was able to hear him tell the dealer that he was going to "turn the trick" about noon. When there would be few visitors. When he went out with the copy of the Monna Vanna that she had found in the storeroom hidden under his coat, she telephoned to Mona, who had agreed to be in a certain pay station near the museum. And Mona at once hurried back to her hiding place, just in time to be out of sight when Harry returned with his copying.

She saw him take the spurious Monna Vanna from under his coat; saw him, too, cover the back of the copy with paste. Then, very swiftly and decisively, he cut the real painting from its frame, and substituting the copy, smoothed it down. And after he had hidden the Monna Vanna, he calmly sat down and resumed his copying! An attendant passed soon afterward, but saw nothing of Harry's coolness and nerve. He gave absolutely no hint of the deed he had just performed, and he was not at all disturbed by the fact that he had actually taken his departure.

He passed out of Mona's ken then, of course, but passed into Mary's as soon as he reached Melnotte's. Neither man was at all suspicious of Mary. She had rendered herself thoroughly unobtrusive ever since she had come to work, and they took her pretty much for granted. That suited her very well, because it increased her opportunities for observation tremendously.

She managed to see Harry take the stolen picture and show it to Melnotte. And then she saw something that surprised her, and upset all her calculations. They took the real art treasure, the picture Harry had stolen, and put it carefully into the frame substituted for it had been taken.

That was the one thing Mary did not expect them to do. She had been certain somehow that the stolen picture, which she had seen in the storeroom, had been faked, and that she would, at the end of the hour, have to make an entirely new plan, unless she wanted all the work she and Mona had already done to go for nothing.

Her only grain of comfort was that she heard Melnotte, speaking over the telephone, make an appointment with Watson for the following afternoon. This was a great relief, for Mary was afraid to jump at a conclusion again, but she did feel that there was a chance now to save the day.

"We're like people working in the dark," she told Mona, that night, when the two compared notes. "So far there's been altogether too much guess work to guide me, and from now

Important events have hung on decisions as trifling and as wholly dictated by chance as that one of the two girls to try a new bakery. While they were selecting their buns they saw a young man who was giving an order at the desk—Mona recognized him as Harry the Hun, the most famous picture thief in the world.

"Would it?" said Watson. "I'd buy it in like a shot and present it to the museum, just for the pleasure of seeing Crogan squirm—the ignominy!"

"Well—it's not very far from here," said Melnotte. "It's in my shop, to be frank! I know I can trust you to respect my confidence!"

There was an exclamation of amazement from Watson.

"Well—I shall certainly have to see if you are right!" he said. "And if you are I'll be as good as my word—I'll take it off your hands and give it to the museum myself. Perhaps people won't take a new rich dabbler in art like Crogan so seriously after this!"

Once more Mona had to suffer the strain of waiting to learn from Mary the outcome of something of which she herself had seen the beginning. But she could wait patiently; she was sure that when Mary came home she would bring her news. And a matter of fact, she had not quite so long to wait. She hurried home herself, and in a little while the telephone rang.

"Quick!" gasped Mary. "I've only a second. Bring your own copy of the Monna Vanna down here at once! Come right into the shop—neither Harry nor Melnotte, she decided. I'll meet you and get it from you. I can't explain more!"

Mona was mystified, but Mary's tone convinced her that it was of the utmost importance that she should obey her clamor to the letter. She wrapped up the copy she had made, laughing at the while at its ridiculous character. Despite the help Harry had given her, that it was grotesque, and it would not deceive any one who knew the original picture for a single minute. Nevertheless, she decided if Mary wanted it, she should have it.

But it was with even greater impatience that she waited at home, after a momentary talk with Mary, who had, of course, no time to tell her what was going on. And when Mary came in Mona pounced upon her before she could even take off her hat.

"Look!" cried Mary dramatically. She lifted her skirt, and underneath, pinned fast to her undershirt, was the precious picture itself—no copy, but the original masterpiece, the famous Monna Vanna.

"Whatever are you going to do with that?"

"—that I don't know myself, yet!" said Mary.

But Mona got the story, bit by bit. "They came back—Harry and Melnotte—with Watson," said Mary. "They showed us the picture. He was tremendously excited—just as stirred up as I would have been if some one had offered me a wonderful diamond necklace. They talked a good deal about showing up a man called Crogan."

"I can tell you about that," said Mona, and did.

"Let me see," said Mary. "Well, any way, Mr. Watson said he would take the picture, and Melnotte was to send it to the house this afternoon. He offered a check, but Melnotte said he would like to see the picture first, and Watson told him all right to come and get it this evening."

"I told you Harry the Hun would have a way of getting rid of the picture," said Mona.

"That was enough for me—that was when I slipped out and telephoned to you," said Mary. "Later, after Watson had gone, they told me to get the picture ready to send, and put it in a box, you know. So I did—and I changed your picture for the real Monna Vanna! They never thought to look at it again, that was the one lot chance I took, of course. So the copy you made has gone to Mr. Watson's house and Melnotte is going for the money in about an hour!"

Mona began to laugh hysterically. "And all the time we've had the original!" she said. "Mary—Mr. Watson will immediately see what an awful copy—my copy—has been sent him!"

"Of course he will! And I'm just wondering how we had better work this. I thought of just going there, giving them the original and telling them what we know, quite frankly, as if we had learned about the theft

by accident, and planned to save him from being cheated. I think he'd be pretty liberal—he could afford to be."

"I think that's the best plan myself," said Mona. "We'll have to trust to his giving us something worth while—but I don't see the honesty anything else we can do. Honestly isn't just the best policy this time—it's the only one, too!"

And so, carrying the precious picture, the two girls set out for Mr. Watson's house.

And Melnotte and Harry the Hun, at about the same time, were making for the same destination. Melnotte was absolutely confident of success, as he had every reason to be.

"We've done ourselves proud this time, Harry, old boy!" he said. "We never made a better strike than this is going to be!"

"It looks good," said Harry. "But it's a good idea not to crow before you've won."

Outside the house they arranged their plan. Melnotte was to go in, get the money, and join Harry outside. Harry had their two bags, and once they had the money, they were to take flight—since the truth would, sooner or later, be sure to come out. They anticipated no hitch; it seemed that all that now remained was to collect the money. And when Melnotte rang the bell he appeared to be expecting him.

Watson, too, was expecting Melnotte. He had brought the president of the Art Museum, his home, expecting to enjoy his discomfort when he showed him the original Monna Vanna. But, when Mona's copy was revealed, it was he who was discomfited. He was seriously upset by Melnotte's denouncing him, and asking him what he meant by such bare-faced fraud. Melnotte, thus struck, could only stammer that there must have been a mistake.

"I'll go back to the shop and get the original picture!" he said.

But the president of the museum was not satisfied.

"Let him go back," he advised, "but with a policeman. He has a good deal to explain, even if he has the picture—for I can tell you, Watson, that the museum had the original a late as yesterday!"

And, despite Melnotte's frantic protests, the butler was sent to call a policeman. Harry heard his whistle and took to flight. But a special policeman happened to guard the house of the block seized him and is—

him to the Watson house. And Melnotte and Harry each began in the case the other of double deal. They convicted themselves and another in their anger; both were placed under arrest.

The two girls, meanwhile, had arrived, in time to see what was going on. They decided that they had chosen a bad time for their visit, and went home. But the next day, after they had read the stories in the papers, they decided to go back to their original plan. Watson received them cordially; Mona told of the suspicious Harry's conduct had roused in her.

By a curious chance, she said, her friend Mary was working for Melnotte, and, learning of the plot, had decided to prevent him from being victimized through the purchase of a stolen picture.

"And here," said Mary dramatically, "is the real Monna Vanna!"

There was no doubt this time. Watson and the president both recognized it.

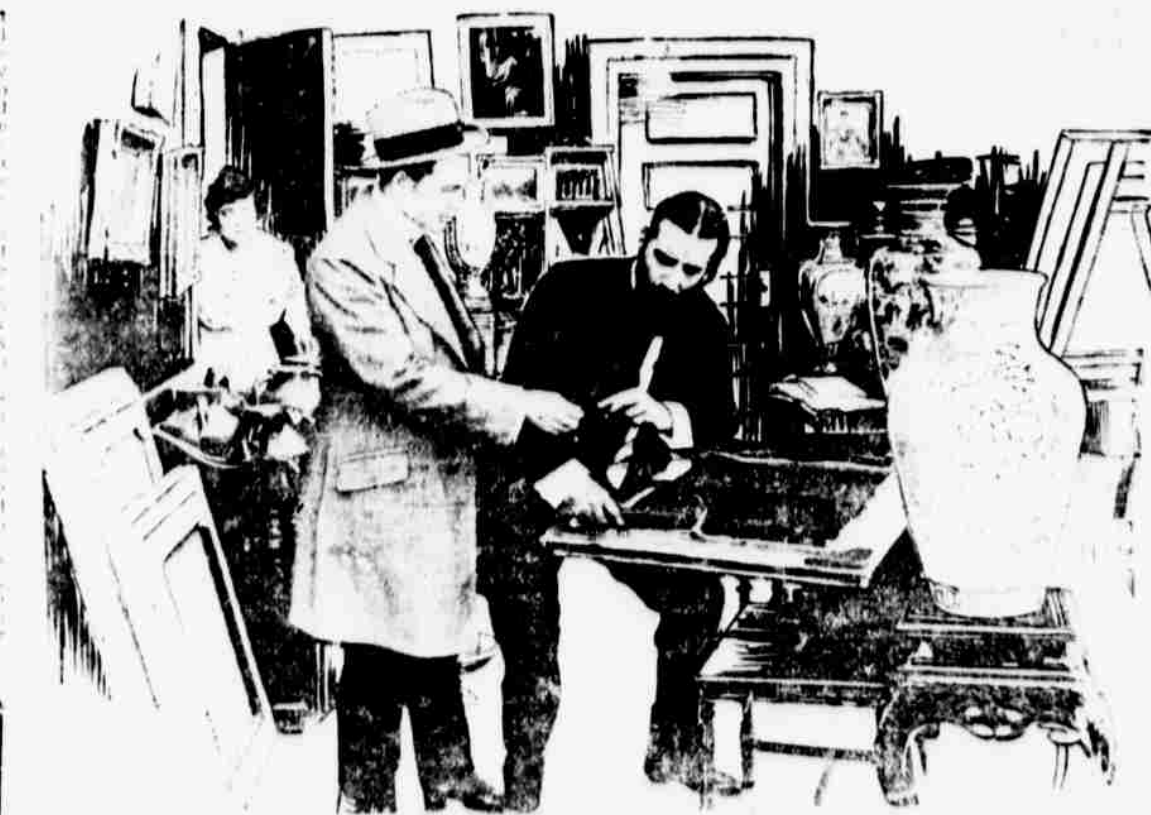
"You two ladies," said the president, "were not only upright, but remarkably clever. I feel that the museum owes you the deepest gratitude. A reward of \$1,000 would have been offered for the return of the picture. I take great pleasure, now, in writing my check for that sum."

"It isn't enough," said Watson. "And I'm grateful, too! I shall give you a certain percentage of the money that I would have given those scoundrels had it not been for your intervention!"

That night Mona and Mary, their wardrobes restored, their jewels recovered, dined luxuriously in the best restaurant in the city.

(End of Sixth Episode.)

THE SEVENTH ADVENTURE OF
"THE SOCIAL PIRATES"
WILL BE PUBLISHED SATURDAY, MAY 6



MARY SAW THEM TAKE THE STOLEN PICTURE AND PUT IT INTO THE FRAME.

SWIFTLY AND DEXTEROUSLY HE CUT THE REAL PAINTING FROM ITS FRAME AND SUBSTITUTED THE COPY.